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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 005410

SIPDIS

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CIS-CARLOS ITURREGUI

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN PRESIDENT FACES VIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS
IN PORT AU PRINCE

Classified By: ECOPOL Counselor Michael Meigs

1. (SBU) President Leonel Fernandez intended his first, brief visit to Port au Prince to serve as a reinforcement of bilateral relations and a boost to the Interim Government as it prepared for January elections. The Dominicans cut the event short as demonstrations outside the presidential palace turned violent. The presidential motorcade ran through bonfires and angry crowds while gunfire sounded. An event intended for amity instead played in Dominican media as an affront and an attack by Haiti on all things Dominican.

2. (C) Early in the Fernandez administration, Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso indicated to the Ambassador Fernandez's interest in visiting Port au Prince, perhaps as early as mid-2005. Instead, relations have been carried out through the Dominican ambassador Jose Serulle Ramia and with occasional working contacts, as the recent encounter between national police chiefs or an earlier encounter between environment ministers. In May of 2005 as Dominicans reacted to reprisals between poor Haitian and Dominican residents in the northern border area, the Haitian foreign minister called at short notice on Morales Troncoso in Santo Domingo to ask for calm and order. Haitian diplomatic business has been handled by a Haitian Consul General in Santo Domingo.

3. (C) The December 12 visit had been planned for some time and kept quiet by those concerned. Fernandez programmed it as a short stopover in route to Mexico's December 13 summit with Central American presidents. He wanted to lower bilateral tensions, to pay his respects to the interim government and to get to know leading presidential candidates. He brought along UK Ambassador Andrew Ashcroft and Italian Ambassador Giorgio Sfarra, both accredited to Port au Prince, as well as Morales Troncoso, Finance Minister Vicente Bengoa and Education Minister Alejandrina German, who was to present a check for the reconstruction of a ten-room school for Dominicans resident in the city.

4. (C) The visit began well, with Fernandez received with honors at the airport and then proceeding to the palace for meetings with Boniface and Latortue. The scene around the palace appeared to be something of a street party as the delegation arrived. Discussions with Haitian officials were cordial. Latortue compared bilateral relations to those of France and Germany -- with a difficult history but with prospects for great improvement. He raised the subject of mistreatment of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. Fernandez described bilateral relations as "delicate" and condemned abuses but advised Latortue that the Dominican Republic has the same right as any country to return illegal migrants to their country of origin. One newspaper account suggests that the Haitians suggested the signing of a joint communique, but that Fernandez left the text on the table.

5. (SBU) Meanwhile, outside the palace the crowds became more agitated. Bonfires were lit to block the streets and tires were thrown into them. Dominican newspapers report that there were chants against Fernandez and that at least one demonstrator brandished an image of the Belgian priest Pierre Ruquoy, recently called back to Europe by his home order after his ministry in favor of Haitian migrants had become controversial. By the time that Fernandez and the Haitian leaders were moving to hold a press conference, the noise of the demonstrations had become loud enough to be intrusive. Dominican officials and security decided to leave immediately.

6. (C) The motorcade faced a frightening prospect as it left the palace. Haitian security was "a disaster" and there appeared to be no control at all of the crowds. According to UK ambassador Ashcroft, the motorcade had to depart at high speed, with the lead cars plowing through two street fires, one of them so high that nothing was visible beyond it. Four Dominican military helicopters stayed overhead all the way and, according to a Dominican private pilot on the scene, two of them discharged their machine guns. (Comment: They may have been firing in the air to intimidate rather than

directly at the crowd. End Comment.) At some point, the vehicle carrying Education Minister German was stopped and evacuated; the car was burned. Dominican press accounts assert that one vehicle in the motorcade took two hits from automatic weapons fire.

17. (C) Fernandez and his party departed for Mexico via a private plane, reportedly loaned by a Venezuelan businessman. The Dominican press and media were in an uproar over the following two days, with anti-Haitian sentiments and offending national pride much on display. Dominican Ambassador Serulle Ramla said President Fernandez ended his trip early "to avoid the risk of being assassinated." -- not only overstating the situation but further increasing alarm in the Dominican Republic. Speaking for the Foreign Ministry, Under Secretary for Consular Affairs Rosario Graciano denounced the events and demanded an apology from Haitian authorities, which was promptly delivered both orally and by diplomatic note. Haitian authorities called the demonstrations "intolerable and inexcusable" and stressed that Fernandez had never been in danger.

18. (SBU) In a separate development, the consternation over Haiti was further reflected on December 14 when the Dominican Supreme Court delivered a constitutional interpretation that reportedly categorized the children of undocumented foreigners as "transients" and therefore not eligible for Dominican nationality. Perhaps the harshest aspect of the public discourse on these themes, in this run up to the Christmas season, has been the sentiment reappearing in commentaries, "The Haitians hate us, and those attacks were just more evidence of their anti-Dominican attitude." Defensive aggression on the sensitive issue of Haiti remains the orientation for many Dominicans -- and perhaps for most of them.
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